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# Tories vow to reduce traveller pitch demands

BASILDON may not have to provide for so many traveller pitches in future if the Conservatives win the next General Election.

The Tories have unveiled proposed law changes which would rid Basildon Council of its obligation to build more caravan pitches by 2011.

The party also hope to close a loophole which allows developments carried out over bank holidays, such as the huge Dale Farm traveller site at Crays Hill, to remain during lengthy legal appeals following retrospective planning applications.

The Government has told Basildon, which already has nearly 120 authorised pitches, to create 62 more to cater for the demand posed by the evacuation of illegal sites at Dale Farm and Hovefields,

By JON AUSTIN

[jon.austin@nqe.com](mailto:jon.austin@nqe.com)

in Wickford. Neighbouring authorities such as Southend, Rochford and Castle Point, which have few or no pitches, have only been made to provide 15 each.

The council is challenging the demand in the High Court, but hopes this will not be necessary if the Tories win the forthcoming election.

The new Conservative proposals would mean local authorities which already provide significant numbers of pitches, such as Basildon, would not need to add any more.

It would also have grounds to refuse further planning applications, while those with few or none, such as Southend, would

not have the same refusal powers.

Basildon Tories welcomed the proposals.

Former council leader Malcolm Buckley said: "We have campaigned for a long time for fair treatment of travellers and of local authorities, where there has been a significant provision of legal pitches."

Bob Neill, the shadow local government and planning minister, said: "The British public want to see fair play for all, rather than special treatment given to some."

"It's wrong certain groups have been given a green light to bypass those rules and concrete over the green belt when no one is looking."

The Tories also hope to stop travellers using human rights laws to remain on illegal sites, by scrapping the Human Rights Act and replacing it with a British Bill of

Rights. Paul Kirkman, Labour councillor for Fryerns, who sat on the regional panel which set the current pitch levels, said the Tory proposals were bizarre.

He said: "It is quite bizarre to abandon a legally-binding plan and then say they will somehow make some authorities make more traveller sites. How will they do this?"

"The levels were set through the proper planning process using a formula and voted for by a panel, including Tories and Lib Dems."

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